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# THE ENGLISH JOURNAL

VOLUME I

MARCH 1912

NUMBER 3

## THE EDUCATIONAL MOVEMENT FOR THE NEW AMERICAN DRAMA

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During the nineteenth century the stage in America was a means of amusement, pure and simple. Our early actors led a picturesque and precarious life, now in the cities, now on the road, "barn-storming" in the primitive sense. But wherever they went, they had but the one mission, to amuse. Reading the memoirs of Jefferson or Mrs. Gilbert, with their recollections of a still earlier generation of stage folk, we feel set back into a joyful old time of bohemian comedy and tragedy lightly carried. The actors were actors and nothing else. Their life was bounded by their profession. They had a profound reverence for Shakesperean tradition; and melodrama, comedy, and farce had come down to them with certain hall-marks which removed these dramatic forms from the vulgar realism of life. In those good old times, the stage was a refuge from reality, a utopia of grandiose emotions and hyperbolic humor, with magnificent tragic frenzies and comic transports. The theater was a place where ladies of delicate sensibilities fainted, and gentlemen applauded and hissed with whole-souled hysteria.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a change began to be noticeable in American drama, which for some time was almost imperceptible. Indeed, *East Lynne*, *Esmeralda*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are still on the road, and most of us have wept over the woes of *The Two Orphans*, so gradual has been the change. The first symptom of the approaching revolution was seen in the increasing sumptuousness and critical care of Shakesperean productions.

Those of us who remember the hey-day of the Daly Theater in New York in the nineties, with the early visits of Sir Henry Irving and Miss Terry, and the advent of Bernhardt, Réjane, Dusé, and other famous actors, have seen the dawn of a new age in American drama. From Shakespere and eighteenth-century comedy and Sardou, the new impulse leapt to the opposite pole of realism in Ibsen. At the touch of the grim wizzard of Scandinavia, the old stage crumbled, a new stage took its place, and a group of young playwrights began to write plays dealing with their own country and approximately with the present time. Owing to the Spanish war, there was an epidemic of war plays, which subsided in a varicoid of western and pan-American adventure plays. Then Nance O'Neill and McKee Rankine came from their Australian tour eastward across the country, playing Sudermann's *Magda* in repertoire, Mary Shaw went westward to the coast with Ibsen's *Ghosts*, followed immediately by Mrs. Patrick Campbell with *Hedda Gabler*, *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, and *The Joy of Living*. Simultaneously with these occurrences, Mrs. Fiske, in her struggle for an independent theater, was searching for a more significant social drama which should reflect American society as French and German drama reflect theirs. The call for the new play was insistent, unmistakable. The trans-continental uproar caused by the passage of the Ibsen pioneers had died down into a grumbling admission by the Great American Public, that although it did not like Ibsen, it had not been able, since seeing him, to like much of anything it had enjoyed before his hateful advent. In short, the public was out of sorts with the stage, wanted something beside amusement. It did not know what it wanted, but it wanted something different from what it was getting.

Many things combined to bring about this demand for a different drama during the first decade of the twentieth century. Suffice it to say that a crisis of social unrest in an established civilization at once deepens the social consciousness, and brings with it a new creative energy in art. The stage has always been quick to reflect social movements. Again and again in its history, from its first glory in Greece to the present time, it has been seized by contending political parties, religious sects, social factions, and made the

platform for enunciating propagandist or controversial ideas. Repeatedly the stage has been forbidden by law to touch upon political or religious issues. Just as repeatedly has it been proved futile to attempt to hinder it long from reflecting the vital thought and struggles of the time—not only reflecting, but directing them. Such a critical period of social unrest and change has come in America, and with the deepening of thought and emotion attendant upon it, our drama has stirred with the quickening of a new creative impulse. We have called in foreign plays to satisfy our groping after more vital themes, a higher artistic treatment, but they remain foreign. No adaptation can make them reflect American life. We must make our own plays out of our own experience. Ibsen is too grim and mystical, Sudermann too brilliant, the French play too erotic, the English play too smug, for our vast-sprawling energy. Here we are with ninety millions of people, spread over a continent which has its peculiar problems, which has gathered from all the nations of the earth ideals and hopes and ambitions, which is, in the language of one of the strongest of the new plays, the Melting-Pot of old civilizations. We are a huge nation, but we are inarticulate. The literature of our earlier period does not represent us today. Our press does not represent us, except in fragmentary flashes, as a great man expresses himself in table-talk. It takes great painters, great poets, great musicians, great dramatists, to make a nation speak articulately to all generations. The spirit of a race must be sublimated out of the temporal into the eternal before it has found itself, before it can be found by the world. The hunger to see ourselves, to find ourselves, to know and voice ourselves, is at the bottom of this craving for a new drama. It is the symptom of a completed nationality, of social fusion, of the creative energy in the heart of all developed and growing societies. Moreover, the instinct that this energy must take the form of beauty and of truth is as deep with us as with other societies, although we have been negligent in raising standards of criticism.

It has been one of the American principles that the self-made man is more admirable than the man who has been helped to success. Hitherto we have applied this principle in our attitude

toward the dramatic art. If one might venture a biblical simile, we have allowed the American Jezebel of commercialism to drive our dramatic prophet into the desert to live on the charity of the birds of the air. But he has stayed his appointed time, and he is returning, not in meekness and chastened subservience, but virile and daring, to voice the will and represent in concrete form the struggle of our society. Since the desert could not starve him, we conclude that he is a true prophet, and prepare to receive him as such.

There is a distrust of artistic subsidizing schemes in this country. They have not worked out very successfully, hitherto, and this has been particularly noticeable in the case of the drama. At the same time, it has been proved that the drama cannot flourish if left unsupported. Some form of co-operation and normal interrelation between it and the public must be devised which suits our democratic system. A remarkable movement has been inaugurated in response to this need, a movement which is spontaneous in origin and democratic in principle. After a year and a half of experimental activity, it has demonstrated its worth, and makes a confident claim for public recognition. This movement has formulated itself as the Drama League of America. The story of the rise of the League is brief and suggestive. It begins all unconsciously in the formation of a little reading circle of friends, who lived in and near Evanston, Ill. These women, meeting periodically, became interested in modern plays, and as their interest grew, it spread to their families and acquaintances. The circle grew, its fame spread with it. It outgrew parlor limits and sought larger places of meeting. Its activities attracted the attention of Chicago, then of other cities. Its reading lists and study programs came into demand, and it soon found itself involved in an increasing correspondence, and with an astonishing membership. It was quite evident that it could not, even if it wished, continue to be a mere club, and in view of its connection by correspondence with similar clubs elsewhere, the idea of federation was inevitable. So it came about that on April 25, 1910, the Drama League of America was organized, with headquarters in Chicago. Its first president was Mrs. A. Starr Best, of Evanston. At the present time, its

membership represents thirty-one states and Canada. It has thrown out a network of clubs over that territory, has strong co-operating centers, issuing bulletins in New York, Boston, and Chicago. It has published valuable reading lists and club study-outlines. It has been widely written up in newspapers and magazines all over the country, and it has on its Board of Directors names of national reputation, such as Mr. George P. Baker, of Harvard University, Dr. Richard Burton, University of Minnesota, Mr. William Norman Guthrie, University of Tennessee, Mr. Frank Chouteau Brown, of Boston, Dr. Louis K. Anspacher, of New York. It has a corps of lecturers presenting its claims to audiences all over the country—audiences of all kinds, university, club, summer-school, church, and miscellaneous.

In order to explain the growth and popularity of the Drama League of America, it is necessary to show what it aims to accomplish, and how its aim fulfils a widespread popular desire.

The purpose of the League, as stated by the President in her first annual address, is—

to create and organize a public which shall support sound literary and artistic effort on the stage. Recognizing the power of the theater as a great civic force, whose influence is exceeded only by that of the press, realizing that censoring will only help advertise a bad play, not check it, the League acts upon the opposite principle, constructively to create a worthy stage—to support all that is sound and valuable in dramatic art, merely shunning and avoiding meretricious and unworthy plays. Accepting the theory that the managers are really willing to give the public what it wants, the founders of the League have determined to band together into a powerful, concrete body thousands of theater-goers, trained to accept and enjoy only artistic drama well acted.

“To create and organize an audience,” that is the League’s prime purpose. To do this constructively, educationally, that is its method. Both purpose and method are original, as far as possible from the old subsidizing and censoring methods of “improvement.” Both grew out of the experience of that little reading-circle of Evanston; they are natural and unconscious evolutions, they are normal to healthy growth. The purpose of the League is to educate a public by showing what is good and why it is good, not by telling it what is bad. It is to create popular enthusiasm

for the good, instead of getting a select few to subsidize a theater, here and there, and hire famous actors to play high-class drama to empty seats, while the public flocks across the street to musical comedy. The League's efforts are not restricted to the great centers in their design of creating an audience. They are truly democratic in that they reach out into the towns, villages, and open country. The audience aimed for is not New York, Boston, or Chicago, but a whole nation—Jonesville as well as Broadway, Tombstone as well as Michigan Avenue. A special solicitude of the leaders is for the one-night-stand towns. They feel that only by bringing the new drama close to the whole people can it be constantly renewed and invigorated.

With the same originality which characterizes its purpose, the League has formulated a method of attaining this. It has departmented its work in various committees. The most interesting of these are the Educational Committee and the Playgoing Committee.

The former is subdivided into seven departments, each of which attends to a special field of educational work. The first department is under the charge of Professor George P. Baker, of Harvard University, and undertakes to direct the study of drama. Outlines and reading lists are furnished, and are in preparation by this department. Professor Baker has built up a dramatic center of influence in Harvard which is widely felt. His classes have produced more than one of the promising young playwrights of the new group, writers like Edward Sheldon, author of *The Nigger*, *Salvation Nell*, *The Boss*. His college course in play-writing is a laboratory for practical experience, and the value to the League of his learning and his technical knowledge is of the highest order.

The second department of the committee, called the Junior Department, organizes and outlines work for children's clubs. Its chairman, Miss Cora Mel Patten, 4858 Champlain Avenue, Chicago, is an enterprising young woman who has organized Junior Leagues in widely separated parts of the country. Children's plays are among the most delightful forms of dramatic entertainment, and the extraordinary popularity and success of this branch of the work call for special notice.

The Teacher's Department, chairman, Miss Lucy Johnston,

1455 E. Fifty-fourth Street, Chicago, a teacher and one of the Directors of the League, has for its object the organizing of teachers' clubs, and the popularizing of a love of drama in the public and private schools of the country.

Closely related to the foregoing department is the Department of Plays for Amateur Acting, chairman, Miss Elvira D. Cabell, 5630 Monroe Avenue, Chicago, also a teacher. The multitude of requests regarding plays suitable for amateur performances, the pleas for advice and suggestion which come to this department are proof of the need of it. A questionnaire, sent out to the institutions of higher education throughout the country by a graduate student at Bryn Mawr this last year, brought out the fact that there are eighty-four institutions among those which took the trouble to reply which support amateur dramatic clubs. When it is considered that in addition to these a large proportion of high schools, normal schools, grade schools, and amateur dramatic clubs unattached to any institution are continually giving plays all over the country, the magnitude and the strategic importance of this amateur work begin to appear. The amateur performance is one of the surest means to arouse and sustain dramatic interest. Its educational value in the school is incalculable, as any teacher who has employed it wisely can testify. The Department of Plays for Amateur Acting furnishes lists of plays suitable for school and other performance, and advises with those who wish direction. The idea of forming such a department was literally an inspiration.

The Lecture Bureau of the Educational Committee, chairman, Mrs. N. B. Lewis, 5435 Magnolia Avenue, Chicago, recommends lecturers and readers to accompany study courses.

The Library Department, chairman, W. N. C. Carlton, Librarian of the Newberry Library, Chicago, furnishes lists of books for general and special study. The lists are selected with a view to meeting various needs, as, for instance, a general list suitable for a small public library, a fuller list for a public library where there is a demand for drama, a list of critical books, of dramatic classics, of modern plays, etc. The books in these lists are purchasable at prices ranging from \$50 up.

The Publication Department, chairman, Mr. Barrett Clark,



University of Chicago, is to issue bibliographies on general and special topics, and will list magazine articles as well as books. Such tabulated information is indispensable to drama-study.

It will be seen, from this outline of the work planned and in operation under the direction of the Educational Committee of the Drama League, how systematic and well adapted to public wants it is. There is scarcely any question that can be formulated which could not readily be assigned to one of these departments for answer. It is the best formulated agency for educating without pedantry which has ever been devised. The whole spirit of the educational department is eager and cordial. It welcomes calls for information as parents welcome a babe's first smile! It has no axe to grind, nothing to gain beyond the altruistic end of a pleasure in art which is made complete by including everybody in its critical enjoyment. The educational uplift of such popular effort as this cannot be measured, but one result is already apparent in every place where a League club has been organized. The local manager feels the pressure of a popular demand for a chance to hear the best attractions on the road. His town knows what these attractions are, and is beginning to clamor for them. That means a revolution in the history of troupes on the road. It means shorter distances, more one-night-stands and half-week engagements; it means an amazing widening of the power of the drama as a vehicle of social utterances.

Another remarkable feature of the League's work is found in the activities of the Playgoing Committee. This committee has in charge the surveillance of contemporary plays. It covers the whole field, keeping track of all good productions of standard as well as of new plays. The purpose of the committee, as formulated on the Chicago play bulletin, is, "The support of good drama by inducing attendance, early in an engagement, upon any play on which the committee issues a bulletin." The committee attend first-night performances, and after consultation, in case they deem the production worthy of support, they write a one-page bulletin, giving in the briefest form information as to the author, the play, character of appeal, acting value, and trenchant quotations as samples of its dialogue. This bulletin is sent to press at once,

thence to an addressing agency, and is in the mails twenty-four hours after the performance, going to every member of the League throughout the country, urging support of the play. Those who live within practical distance of the local production are urged to attend early in the engagement in order to assure the success of the play and make a run possible. New York, Boston, and Chicago regularly issue such bulletins. The play bulletined in New York is awaited with interest in Boston and Chicago, and vice versa. The fact that one center bulletins a play does not compel the other centers to do so, but as a matter of fact, the harmony of opinion among the local playgoing committees has been practically unanimous. A play bulletined in Chicago stands an overwhelming probability of being bulletined in the other centers. The attitude of the large producing companies of the country, as well as of the local managers, to the work of the Playgoing Committee has been most cordial. They have been quick to recognize the advantage of the bulletin as the highest form of advertising a good production, because the indorsement of the League is disinterested. The effect of these bulletins in increasing box-office receipts has been demonstrated again and again.

But the good work of the Play Bulletin does not stop with the large bulletining centers. The mailing of the sheet to every individual member and affiliated club gives it national scope. Further, the effect of the bulletin on the one-night stand situation is electrifying in its possibilities. In the state of Illinois there are 130 of these stands and only one week stand. In co-operation with the local manager, the bookings of the one-night stand may be examined by the Playgoing Committee, and such attractions as are of merit may be indorsed and bulletined in advance of the engagement by the League. The co-operation of the League in bringing better attractions, and in helping to bring about some periodicity of these instead of the present helter-skelter dearth and congestion of theatrical offerings throughout the more sparsely settled regions of the country, will be a development of the work in the near future.

An earnest appeal for members, for co-operation, is made by the organization. All who are interested may obtain information from the secretary, Mrs. H. P. Jones, 5529 Cornell Avenue, Chicago.